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# Understanding Accommodations, Modifications, and Interventions

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## Abstract

*With a clear understanding of the terms, along with examples of their appropriate use, all educators can make wise decisions about the application of accommodations, modifications, and interventions.*

**Key words:** *inclusive education, special ed/nonGT*

**I**nclusion is a philosophy of acceptance and belonging to the community and is designed to meet the needs of all students (Gal, Schreur, & Engel-Yeger, 2010). Classrooms across the country are becoming more inclusive and diverse with the increase of students representing different cultures, speaking different first languages, and exhibiting different skill levels (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In an effort to meet changing student needs, teachers representing various

grade levels and subjects make numerous decisions daily to promote student success. Some of these decisions include the implementation of accommodations, modifications, and interventions. However, teachers often confuse these terms (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010), and members of school-based teams have historically not made wise decisions regarding their use (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Capizzi, 2005). Therefore, this article clarifies these terms and provides examples of their appropriate use.

**Table 1. Do's and Don'ts****Current Practice**

Researchers have identified several reasons why educators need to have a working knowledge of accommodations, modifications, and interventions. First, the percentage of students with disabilities receiving the majority of their instruction in general education classrooms continues to rise (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). These students have Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) that state their entitled accommodations and modifications (Taub, White, & Ryndak, 2014), most of which are implemented by general educators. Similarly, students with a Section 504 plan are entitled to reasonable accommodations based on individualized need.

Second, teachers are exploring various interventions within their school district's multi-tiered or Response to Intervention system. Consequently, teachers are following a structured process, which often begins by documenting accommodations and interventions within the first tier before advancing the student into more intense second or third tiers (Kuchle, Edmonds, Danielson, Peterson, & Riley-Tillman, 2015). Further, teachers have expressed confusion regarding these terms and made errors regarding their use. For example, teachers often over-accommodate students (Lai & Berkeley, 2012); they do not handle logistics well, such as failing to prepare materials in advance for high-stakes testing accommodations; they identify interventions that are really accommodations (Conderman & Jung, 2014); and they believe that accommodations lower standards (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010). Therefore, Table 1 provides a list of do's and don'ts regarding accommodations, modifications, and interventions to guide teachers and members of school-based teams.

To further clarify and provide examples of accommodations, modifications, and interventions, next we present information about each of these terms separately, along with examples and recommendations.

**Accommodations**

Accommodations are small changes in how teach-

Do	Don't
Individualize accommodations, modifications, and interventions for students and situations.	Assign an accommodation, modification, or intervention based on the child's disability label.
At least annually, assess the student's need for accommodations, modifications, and interventions.	Automatically use accommodations or modifications used for the child during the previous year.
Use the same accommodations and modifications in instruction and assessment.	Use an accommodation or modification the first time on a high-stakes assessment.
Provide a rationale (such as assessment data) for each accommodation, modification, or intervention.	Over-accommodate by providing every possible accommodation on the IEP or 504 form.
Involve team members, family members, and the student (as appropriate) in discussing accommodations, modifications, and interventions.	Assume others know or understand the purpose for the accommodation, modification, or intervention.
Research and reflect on your knowledge and use of evidence-based practices.	Assume you are correctly implementing interventions without researching specific implementation procedures.
Document use and effectiveness of accommodations, modifications, or interventions with students.	Rely on your memory for such details.

ers present content or how the student demonstrates knowledge. Accommodations do not alter learning outcomes for students, and they do not teach students new skills; but rather they provide student access to the curriculum or assessments. In other words, accommodations even the playing field and offset or correct for the disability. Thompson, Morse, Sharpe, and Hall (2005) described four main accommodation categories.

**Presentation accommodations.** These accommodations help students access material by presenting information in an alternative mode, such as visual, tactile, auditory, or a combination of visual and auditory formats. For example, students who read below grade level can access text using digital texts, ebooks, or audiobooks that provide access to the same material, but in a different presentation mode. Similarly, students with visual issues who need print materials enlarged use various magnification devices, large computer monitors, computers with screen enlargement

**Table 2. Various Accommodations and Their Uses**

Accommodation	Appropriate use(s)	Inappropriate use(s)	Cautions/reminders
Extra time	Student processes information slower than peers. Student reads accurately, but slower than peers.	Student does not know the information on the assessment. Assessment assesses fluency or rate.	Student may need additional time on some (but not all) assignments.
Oral testing	Student reading, decoding, or comprehension skills are below grade level.	Peer reads test to student. Reader provides clues to answers based on voice intonation.	Use same person/voice as much as possible for consistency. Provide training to all personnel involved if technology is used.
Alternative setting	Student is distracted or embarrassed to take test in the classroom, and therefore scores do not accurately reflect student's skill level.	Alternative setting is unsupervised.	Instructional setting often provides important clues when taking the test, so removing the student may place him/her at a disadvantage.
Dictation of answers	Student has aversion to writing utensils. Student has poor fine-motor skills.	No one teaches student new writing skills.	Gradually increase writing demands, such as including fill-in-the-blank or matching formats, if possible.

programs, or closed-circuit television (CCTV). Young students benefit from print-based materials with plenty of white space, segmented text that allows for natural breaks and improved visual tracking, and highlighted keywords and visual cues.

**Response accommodations.** These accommodations allow students to demonstrate knowledge or skill in a different way. For example, students with fine-motor writing challenges type their responses or verbally dictate them. Other students draw pictures of vocabulary words rather than write definitions, or they use assistive technologies that provide a written or verbal response. Young students often are allowed to point to answers or use a picture system to engage in activities involving verbal and written responses. Speech recognition programs used with a word processor also provide an alternative response accommodation.

**Setting accommodations.** These accommodations provide an alternative place or different equipment for completing an assignment or assessment. A student who is easily distracted may perform better when working alone, in a small group, or in a less distracting environment. Other students need preferential seating or a different type of desk or work station. Young students with

disabilities may need special lighting, noise buffers, or adaptive furniture. Soft surfaces (e.g., carpet, curtains, and acoustic tiles), floor lamps, and natural light minimize distractions from fluorescent lighting and other environmental noises. Additionally, adaptive classroom furniture, secured work items, and adaptive toys help maintain student attention and focus.

**Timing and scheduling accommodations.** These accommodations refer to the amount of time a student needs to complete an assignment or assessment, or how time is organized for an assignment or assessment. For example, students who process information slowly are allowed time-and-a-half to complete most lengthy assignments, and students who are more attentive during certain times of the day are allowed to take some assessments during those most productive times. Additional timing and scheduling accommodations include breaking the test into small sections, allowing students to take the test over a period of days, providing short breaks during the testing period, and allowing flexibility regarding the order of work completion or classroom tasks.

Teachers need to be mindful of these categories and their appropriate uses. Table 2 provides addi-

tional examples (and non-examples) of specific accommodations in these four categories.

Teachers also need to be aware of questions to consider when discussing student accommodations with their IEP team members, such as,

- What data provides the rationale for the accommodation?
- Who is responsible for implementing the accommodation?
- Who is teaching the student the needed skills that substantiate the need for the accommodation? For example, who is teaching the student specific reading skills if the student is allowed to access text electronically because of below-grade-level reading and decoding skills?
- When will members of the intervention, 504, or student team reevaluate the appropriateness of the accommodation?
- How can we involve the student and his or her parents in the accommodations?

If school-based team members neglect to ask these important questions, then teachers, parents, and students often wonder why the accommodation is necessary, assume someone else is responsible for the accommodation, and neglect to address the reason for the accommodation and the need to remediate necessary skills.

## Modifications

Modifications refer to substantial changes, such as in the content being covered in an assignment or test (Darrow, 2007). Teachers develop modifications when the student is unable to complete the same assignment or participate in the same way as other students because of the nature of his or her disabilities. Specifically, modifications refer to curricular or assessment alterations that adjust expectations at below—as well as above—grade-level standards (Friend & Bursuck, 2015). Like accommodations, modifications do not teach students new skills. Because modifications often lower standards, they should be used sparingly, especially for students who take state or district

assessments. Without access to grade-level curriculum, these students would clearly be at a disadvantage when taking such assessments. Students with disabilities should receive a different curriculum than students without disabilities only when it is unrealistic for them to benefit from the general education curriculum (Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA], 2004). On the other hand, students who test out of an instructional unit can receive modifications that include above-grade-level acceleration or enrichment activities (Friend & Bursuck, 2015).

When developing modifications, educators often create a menu of support ideas to be used for the student *across* instructional activities (Clayton, Burdge, Denham, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2006). Using this approach, teachers create a complete menu of supports that correlate with major instructional activities such as listening, reading, and writing. Having this menu developed in advance ensures that the student will be provided with meaningful supports and that these supports are not created on the fly. For example, when the class is completing a vocabulary worksheet, the student can match picture symbols to vocabulary words. He or she would complete similar activities in other classes under similar circumstances.

Common modifications include changing a task from recall to recognition, allowing students to answer only main ideas from a unit of instruction, altering multiple-choice answers to include fewer options, testing only big ideas, and having the student work from above or below grade-level standards (Conderman & Jung, 2014). Teachers making modifications should consider the following:

- Use the smallest modification necessary that will provide the appropriate level of support for students (e.g., change only the essay part of an exam rather than the whole exam).
- Ensure that the modification is associated with the same skill area or instructional topic (e.g., while others are describing various battles in the Civil War, one student matches illustra-



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# Accommodations

tions of concepts associated with the Civil War to their corresponding word cards).

- As early as possible within an instructional unit, determine the student's needed modifications. This is important because modifications require more time to develop than accommodations. Sometimes special educators or paraprofessionals develop modifications, and they appreciate sufficient lead time.
- Document modifications and communicate about them with parents, so they understand that the student is being held to different standards and possibly different grading expectations.

## Accommodation or Modification?

Often teachers have difficulty determining whether an action is an accommodation or modification. In these circumstances, teachers should refer back to the associated learning intent or outcome. For example, if the outcome is for the student to write an essay, and skills such as theme organization and written grammar are being assessed, then allowing the student to type (rather than write by hand) would be an accommodation because essential writing skills have not been compromised. In contrast, allowing the student to dictate answers would be a modification because a verbal response deviates from the original instructional intent (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010).

## Interventions

Interventions are actions that produce student learning in social, behavioral, or academic skills. Educators provide interventions in large groups, small groups, or on an individual basis. Some effective interventions include providing clear and explicit instruction, reviewing frequently, modeling a new skill, providing sufficient student practice of the skill, providing specific student feedback (Boyle & Scanlon, 2010), teaching metacognitive strategies, using explicit instruction, teaching appropriate social behaviors, helping students generalize skills to various tasks and environments (Ziegler & McLeskey, 2016), and

using Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) and peer tutoring (Maheady, Mallette, & Harper, 2006).

When implementing interventions, teachers should consider the following:

- Research the intervention to ensure implementation with fidelity. Sometimes teachers indicate that an intervention was ineffective in their classroom when they were not implementing the intervention correctly. The *Academic Intervention 'Critical Components' Checklist* (Wright, 2010) helps educators monitor several important instructional aspects when implementing interventions. Teachers also can receive feedback from a colleague regarding their implementation and make adjustments based on such feedback.
- Allow sufficient time for an intervention. Sometimes teachers discontinue an intervention after too brief a period of time. The time for an intervention will vary by the skill, the student's age or grade, the student's skill level, the length of each intervention session, the frequency of intervention sessions, and the duration of the intervention period (Wright, 2010). Team members should develop a tentative overall time frame and details regarding the frequency of progress monitoring.
- Reflect on the effectiveness of the intervention for future lessons.
- When feasible, have students assist with data collection. For example, students can graph or chart their individual progress toward behavioral or academic goals. This process supports student development of critical self-regulation skills (Ness & Middleton, 2012).

Table 3 provides examples of several instructional tasks with corresponding accommodations, modifications, and interventions.

## Closing Thoughts

Accommodations, modifications, and interventions are actions educators take to support student

**Table 3. Examples of Accommodations, Modifications, and Interventions**

Instructional intent	Accommodations	Modifications	Interventions
Solve ten 2-digit division problems with remainders.	Enlarge or use text-to-speech technologies. Allow additional time. Reduce number of problems. Eliminate need for copying.	Provide ten 1-digit division problems. Provide ten 1-digit problems without remainders.	Provide multiple opportunities for students to practice the skill. Teach a strategy. Teach prerequisite skills. Scaffold steps.
Write a persuasive essay with at least three reasons for a position.	Allow use of a thesaurus. Allow use of adaptive devices: pencil grips, special pen holder, erasable pen; raised or color-coded lined paper. Allow extra time.	Change the number of reasons to include. Allow outlining instead of writing. Provide multiple-choice questions or fill-in-the-blanks.	Have students use a writer's notebook. Teach a mnemonic to remember persuasive essay components. Model brainstorming to break the "idea" logjam. Have students self-monitor and graph results to increase writing fluency.
Write a summary of the plot, setting, and characters of a story written at grade-level readability.	Highlight important ideas and tell students to read them first. Provide audiotaped material of story. Provide story in Braille or embossed format. Allow written or verbal responses.	Reduce reading level of the story. Provide multiple-choice options. Provide a partially completed graphic organizer. Require responses to characters and setting, but not plot.	Model how to create "mental pictures" while reading by studying text illustrations. Teach students to recognize natural pauses occurring between phrases. Use guided questions to activate students' prior knowledge.

learning. Accommodations bypass or compensate for the disability while modifications adjust the difficulty level of a task; but only interventions teach new skills. Teachers, parents, and other IEP team members need to know the reason and purpose for each of these as they make decisions that impact instruction. Implementing these appropriately and with fidelity helps improve instruction and supports student success in both general education and special education settings. ■

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